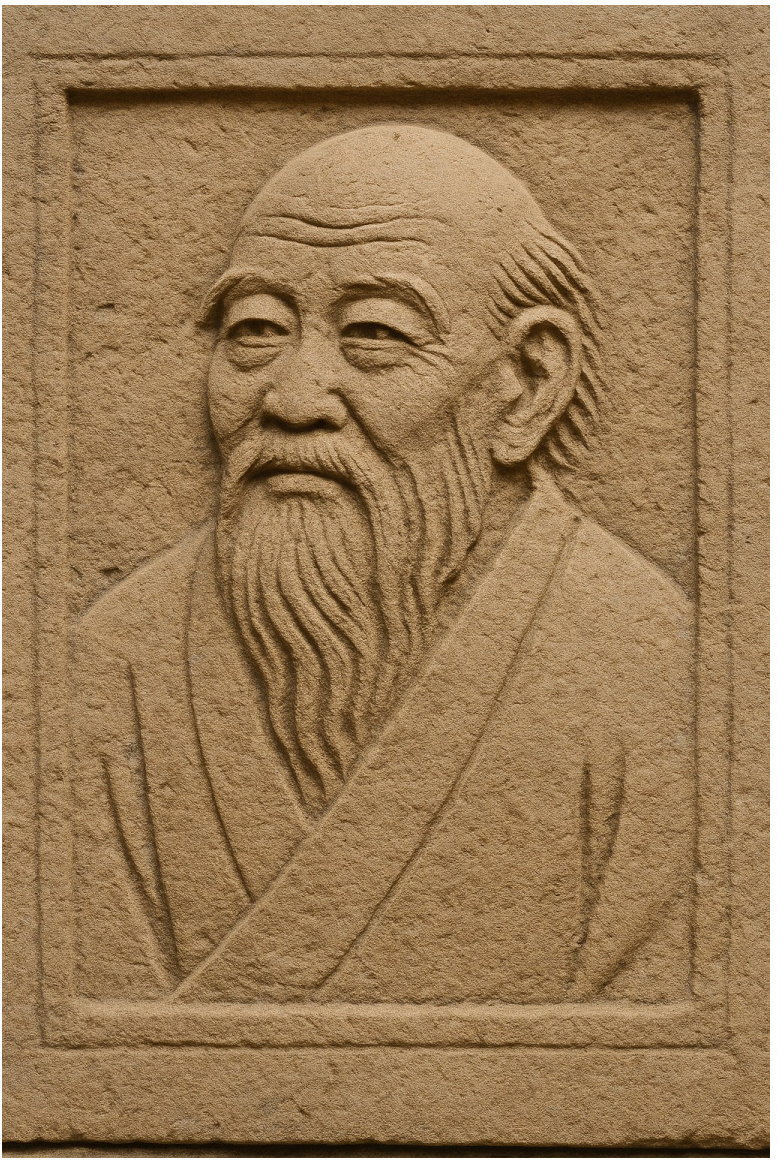
# The Good Path of Laozi



# The Good Path of Laozi
# A New Translation of the Tao Te Ching by Seten Tomh

*Revised Edition*

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The frontispiece is an AI generated image of Laozi based on a Han dynasty (202 BCE–9 CE) stone carving, believed to originate from the Wuliang Ancestral Hall in Jiaxiang County, Shandong Province. It features a scene widely interpreted as Confucius meeting Laozi, making it one of the most ancient visual representations of Laozi known.

Back image is a peak in the Kunlun range from Robert Shaw, Visits to High Tartary, 1871 (Wikipedia Commons, public domain).

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Dedicated to the memory of Professor Boo Thompson (1958–2024)

# FOREWORD

Laozi is traditionally believed to have flourished during the sixth century BCE. According to tradition, Laozi was born in 601 BCE and was a senior contemporary of Confucius (551–479 BCE), and the two are said to have met. The name "Laozi" literally means "Old Master." He is reputed to be the author of the Tao Te Ching. The earliest biography of Laozi is found in the Record of the Grand Historian by the Han dynasty court scribe and historian Sima Qian (ca. 94 BCE). Laozi, who is believed to have been born in Quren in the district of Hu in the state of Chu, near modern Luyi in Henan province, was properly named Li Er and also called Dan. He was an archivist of sacred books and possibly an astrologer at the Royal Library during the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770–256 BCE). However, some scholars argue that Laozi, lived during the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), perhaps during the fifth century BCE.

After many years, Laozi became disillusioned with the corruption of court life at Zhou, the capital of which was located at Luoyang. He resigned from his post around the age of 70 or 80. While traveling west, he was stopped by the border guard Yinxi at the Hangu Pass, likely between 450 and 400 BCE, before the pass was fortified in 361 BCE as the border entrance to the state of Qin. Yinxi, recognizing Laozi's wisdom, asked him to record his thoughts for posterity, indicating Laozi's fame and respect. The result was the Tao Te Ching, which addresses "the path" (Tao) and morality (Te).

According to the Pearly Bag of the Three Caverns, after receiving the Tao Te Ching from Laozi, Yinxi became his disciple and attained the Way after three years.

Tradition holds that the Tao Te Ching was written around 531 BCE, when Laozi was 70 years old. Some traditions claim that Laozi traveled to India, where he met the Buddha, while others suggest he journeyed to the Kunlun Mountains in Tibet. Archaeological research indicates that the sayings of the Tao Te Ching were compiled between the fourth and third centuries BCE.

The oldest known version, albeit incomplete, is the Guodian text, dated to approximately 300 BCE. However, it is logical to assume that an oral tradition preceded the written version. Some scholars believe that the Tao Te Ching is an edited compilation of sayings attributed to Laozi according to an oral tradition preserved by his followers, rather than a single cohesive work.

Although some scholars question whether Laozi ever existed as a historical figure, it is reasonable to assume that a founder must have initiated the Taoist tradition, and someone must have compiled the Tao Te Ching. We may as well call this person "Laozi," which functions as an epithet—like "the Buddha"—rather than a proper name.

The standard version of the Tao Te Ching consists of approximately five thousand characters, divided into 81 chapters, traditionally split into two parts titled "Tao" and "Te." In some versions, the order of the parts is reversed, beginning with chapter 38. There are other variations, but most editions of the Tao Te Ching are consistent and have been passed down for at least 2,300 years. It is the second most translated book in the world after the Bible.

# The Good Path of Laozi

# *Part I*

# *The Way*

1

## EMBODYING THE WAY

The Way that can be spoken is not the eternal Way.
The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.
The nameless is the origin of nature.
The named is the mother of all things.

Thus, free of desire, one may perceive the subtle essence.
Caught in desire, one observes its manifestations.
These two arise together yet have different names.
Both are called profound:

profound within the profound,
the gateway to all wonders.

2

## SELF-CULTIVATION

Everyone under Heaven knows beauty as beauty; thus, there is ugliness.
Everyone knows good as good; thus, there is evil.

Therefore, being and non-being give rise to each other,
difficult and easy complete each other,
long and short contrast each other,
high and low depend on each other,
sound and tone harmonize with each other,
front and back follow each other.

Thus, the sage
manages affairs without action,
and teaches without words.

All things arise but do not initiate them.
They grow but do not possess them.
They act but do not depend on them.
They accomplish but do not cling to success.

It is precisely because they do not cling to success
that success endures.

3

## PACIFYING PEOPLE

Not esteeming the worthy
causes the people not to contend.
Not valuing rare goods
causes the people not to steal.
Not displaying what is desirable
keeps the people's hearts undisturbed.

Thus, the sage governs by
emptying the mind and filling the belly,
weakening desires and strengthening the bones,

always keeping the people free from knowledge and desire,
and ensuring that those who are wise do not dare to act.

By acting without action, nothing remains ungoverned.

4

## THE UNORIGINATED

The Way is like an empty vessel, used yet never filled;
deep, like the source of all things.

It dulls the sharp,
untangles the knot,
softens its brightness,
mingles with the dust.

Deep, as though it might still exist,
I do not know whose child it is.
It seems to precede the highest.

5

## THE POWER OF EMPTINESS

Nature is not benevolent;
it treats all things as straw dogs.
The sage is not benevolent;
he treats the people as straw dogs.

Between Heaven and Earth,
is it not like a bellows?
Empty, yet inexhaustible,
the more it moves, the more it produces.

Excessive words lead to exhaustion;
better to remain centred.

6

## THE COMPLETED IMAGE

The spirit of the valley does not die.
This is called the Profound Feminine.

The gate of the Profound Feminine
is called the root of nature.

Endlessly flowing,
its use is without effort.

7

## THE INNER LIGHT

Heaven is long lasting, and Earth endures.
The reason nature can endure and last long
is that they do not live for themselves.
Therefore, they can live forever.

Thus, the sage
puts themselves last and finds themselves first.
They put themselves aside and find themselves preserved.

Is it not because they are selfless
that they can fulfil their own nature?

8

## NATURAL SIMPLICITY

The highest good is like water.
Water benefits all beings without competing.
It dwells in places people disdain;
thus, it is close to the Way.

In dwelling, be in harmony with the earth.
In heart, be deep like an abyss.
In relationships, be kind.
In speech, be trustworthy.
In governance, be just.
In actions, be competent.
In movement, be timely.

Only by not competing
can one be without fault.

9

## MISFORTUNE

Holding and filling a cup to the brim
is not as good as stopping in time.

Honing a blade to a fine point
cannot preserve it for long.

When gold and jade fill the hall,
no one can protect them.

Wealth and pride
bring about their own downfall.

Achieve success, and then withdraw;
this is the Way of Heaven.

10

## THE CAPACITY TO BE

Can you balance your soul and embrace unity,
without letting go of the One?
Can you focus your breath and become as soft
as a newborn babe?
Can you cleanse your vision and perceive
without flaw?
Can you love the people and govern the nation
without effort?
Can you open and close the spiritual gates,
remaining receptive like the female?
Can you illuminate the four quarters
without relying on knowledge?

Give birth and nurture;
create but do not possess.
Act without dependence;
lead without control.
This is called the profound virtue.

11

## THE UTILITY OF EMPTINESS

Thirty spokes converge on a single hub,
but it is the empty space within the wheel that makes it useful.

Clay is shaped to form a vessel,
but it is the empty space inside that makes it useful.

Doors and windows are cut to create a room,
but it is the empty space within that makes it useful.

Therefore, while presence provides advantages,
absence provides utility.

12

## CHECKING DESIRE

The five colours blind people's eyes.
The five sounds deafen people's ears.
The five tastes dull people's tongues.
Riding and hunting drive people's minds to madness.
Hard-to-get goods disturb people's actions.

Therefore, the sage
serves the belly, not the eyes.
Thus, they discard what is alluring and choose what is simple.

13

## FEARING DISGRACE

Favour and disgrace are both to be feared.
Great trouble comes from valuing the self.

Why do I say favour and disgrace are both to be feared?
Favour is obtained from below, and losing it brings fear.
To lose favour brings fear.
This is why favour and disgrace are both to be feared.

Why do I say great trouble comes from valuing the self?
The reason I suffer greatly is because I have a self.
If I had no self, what trouble would I have?

Therefore, those who value the world as much as their own body
can be entrusted with the world.
Those who love the world as much as their own body
can be trusted with the world.

14

## THE PROFOUND SUPPORT

We look at it but do not see it; we call it invisible.
We listen to it but do not hear it; we call it inaudible.
We touch it but do not grasp it; we call it intangible.
These three cannot be fully comprehended,
so, they are merged into one.

Above,
it is not bright;
below, it is not dark.
Endless and nameless,
it returns to the realm of nothingness.
This is the form of the formless,
the image of the imageless.
It is called elusive and evasive.
We approach it but do not see its beginning;
we follow it but do not see its end.

Hold to the ancient Way
to govern the present.
Knowing the ancient origin
is called the thread of the Way.

15

## CLARIFYING THE GOOD

The ancient masters were subtle and profound, their wisdom so
deep it could not be fully comprehended.
Because they were beyond grasp,

I can only attempt
to describe them:
cautious, as if crossing a river in winter;
wary, as if surrounded by dangers;
reserved, like a guest;
fluid, like melting ice;
simple, like uncarved wood;
vast, like a valley;
turbid, like muddy water.

Who can make the muddy water clear? By letting it be still, it will
gradually become clear.
Who can bring peace to a restless state? By letting it move gently,
life will emerge.

Those who follow the Way do not seek to be full.
Because they do not seek fullness,
they can remain concealed and not reach completion.

16

## RETURNING TO THE ROOT

Attain the ultimate emptiness;
maintain deep stillness.

All things arise together,
and I observe their return.
Everything flourishes, then each returns to its root.
Returning to the root is called stillness.
Stillness is called the return to life.
The return to life is called the eternal.

To know the eternal is to be enlightened.
Not knowing the eternal leads to reckless actions and misfortune.

Knowing the eternal brings acceptance.
Acceptance leads to impartiality.
Impartiality leads to true kingship.
True kingship is in harmony with the divine.
The divine is in harmony with the Way.
The Way endures forever.

Even when the body perishes, the Way remains unchanged.

17

## SIMPLE VIRTUE

The highest rulers are those whom the people scarcely know exist.
Next, those who are loved and praised.
Then, those who are feared.
Finally, those who are despised.

When trust is lacking, mistrust will arise.

The wise ruler values few words.

When their work is accomplished and the task completed,
the people say, "We did it on our own."

18

## SOCIAL DECLINE

When the Great Way is abandoned,
benevolence and righteousness emerge.

When wisdom and intellect appear,
great deceit follows.

When the six family relationships are in disharmony,
filial piety and compassion are proclaimed.

When the state falls into chaos,
loyal ministers arise.

19

## RETURNING TO HONESTY

Eliminate sagacity and abandon wisdom,
and the people will benefit a hundredfold.
Eliminate benevolence and abandon righteousness,
and the people will return to filial piety and compassion.
Eliminate cleverness and abandon profit,
and there will be no thieves or robbers.

These three are not sufficient to fully convey the Way.

Therefore, let them
hold to simplicity:
See the plain, embrace the uncarved block,
reduce selfishness,
and have few desires.

20

## AGAINST CONVENTION

Abandon learning, and sorrow will cease.

What difference is there
between "yes" and "no"?
How far apart
are beauty and ugliness?

What people fear, must we not also fear?
Yet those who are uncultivated cannot transcend this fear; they
remain uncentred and lost.

The multitudes bustle,
as if partaking in a grand feast,
like spring ascending the terraces.
I alone am still,
as if rooted in uncertainty,
like an infant before it learns to smile,
weary and wandering, with no place to return.

The people are full,
yet I alone seem empty, as though left behind.
Am I truly a fool?
My heart is muddled and unclear.

Common folk are bright and sharp,
but I alone seem dim and dull.
Common folk are shrewd and observant,
but I alone am lost in thought, gloomy and withdrawn.
Calm, as if the ocean's depths.
Drifting, as if without anchor.
The multitudes all have their purposes,
but I alone seem stubborn and uncouth.

I am different from the rest,
yet I cherish my mother's milk.

21

## MODESTY

The form of great virtue follows only the Way.

The Way, as a thing, is elusive and indistinct.
Indistinct! Elusive! Yet within it, there is form.
Elusive! Indistinct! Yet within it, there is substance.
Profound! Obscure! Yet within it, there is essence.
This essence is profoundly real.
Within it, there is trust.

From ancient times until the present,
its name has endured,
witnessing the origin of all things.
How do I know the origin of all things?
By this.

22

## OVERFLOWING HUMILITY

Bending becomes whole;
what is crooked becomes straight.
What is hollow becomes full;
what is worn out becomes new.
Having little leads to gaining;
having much leads to confusion.

Therefore, the sage
embraces the One and becomes a model for the world.
Not self-seeing, they are enlightened.
Not self-righteous, they are prominent.
Not self-praising, they achieve merit.
Not self-asserting, they grow.

Indeed, they do not dispute;
therefore, no one in the world can dispute with them.

What the ancients said,
"Bending leads to wholeness" —
how can this be empty talk?
Indeed, wholeness returns to them.

23

## NOTHINGNESS

Rare are words that are truly natural.
Therefore, a fierce wind does not last all morning;
a sudden downpour does not last all day.

What causes this? Nature.
Even nature cannot sustain such forces for long;
how much less can humans?

Thus, those who act in accord with the Way
become one with the Way.
Those who act in accord with virtue become one with virtue.
Those who act in accord with loss become one with loss.

To those who are one with the Way,
the Way gladly welcomes them.
To those who are one with virtue,
virtue gladly welcomes them.
To those who are one with loss,
loss gladly welcomes them.

If trust is lacking, there will be no trust.

24

## BITTER GRACE

Those who tiptoe cannot stand firm.
Those who stride over cannot walk far.
Those who are self-seeing lack clarity.
Those who are self-righteous lack respect.
Those who boast achieve nothing.
Those who are arrogant do not endure.

Such behaviours are contrary to the Way.
They are like leftover food or burdensome actions—
things detested by all.
Thus, those who follow the Way avoid them.

25

## THE PRIMORDIAL IMAGE

There is something undifferentiated and complete,
existing before nature.
Silent and boundless,
it stands alone, unchanging.
Moving in cycles without exhaustion,
it may be the mother of all under Heaven.

I do not know its name.
For lack of a better term, I call it the Way.
If pressed to give it another name, I call it Great.
Great means flowing;
flowing means reaching far,
and reaching far means returning.

The Way is great,
Heaven is great,
Earth is great,
and the Sage is great.
Within the universe, there are four greats,
and the Sage is one of them.

Humans follow the earth.
The earth follows Heaven.
Heaven follows the Way.
The Way follows what is natural.

26

## WEIGHING THE GOOD

The heavy is the root of the light.
Calm is the master of restlessness.

Therefore, the noble one, though travelling all day,
does not abandon their carriage.
Though surrounded by splendid sights and places of ease,
they remain composed and detached.

How can the ruler of ten thousand chariots
regard their own life with levity?

If they treat themselves lightly, they lose their foundation.
If they become restless, they lose their mastery.

27

## SKILFUL MEANS

The good traveller leaves no tracks.
The good speaker leaves no flaws.
The good calculator uses no tools.
The good closer uses no bolts, yet nothing can open it.
The good knot uses no rope, yet nothing can untie it.

Thus, the sage
always helps people
and abandons no one.
They always care for all beings
and discard nothing.
This is called the illumination of subtlety.

Therefore, the moral person is the teacher of the immoral,
and the immoral person is the resource of the moral.
If one does not honour the teacher
and value the resource,
even with great wisdom, they are deeply deluded.
This is called the essential subtlety.

28

## BACK TO BASICS

Know the male yet keep to the female.
Be the valley of the world.
By being the valley of the world,
constant virtue will never leave,
and you will return to the state of a child.

Know the white yet keep to the black.
Be the model for the world.
By being the model for the world,
constant virtue will not falter,
and you will return to the infinite.

Know honour yet keep to disgrace.
Be the valley of the world.
By being the valley of the world,
constant virtue will be sufficient,
and you will return to simplicity.

When simplicity is broken, it turns into useful tools.
The sage uses these tools as instruments for leadership.
Thus, the great Way is never divided.

29

## INACTION

Those who seek to seize the world—
I see they cannot succeed.

The world is a sacred vessel;
It is not meant to be controlled.
Those who meddle with it will ruin it;
those who cling to it will lose it.

Thus, things may
advance or retreat,
breathe softly or blow fiercely,
be strong or frail,
rise or crumble.

For this reason, the sage
shuns excess,
eschews extravagance,
abandons grandiosity.

30

## LIMITING WAR

Those who assist a ruler with the Way
do not rely on force to dominate the world,
for such actions inevitably rebound upon them.
Where armies camp, thorns and brambles grow.
After great wars, years of famine follow.

The virtuous achieve their goals and then stop;
they do not dare to seize control by force.
They achieve their goals without boasting,
without claiming credit,
without arrogance,
without aggression,
without stubbornness.

What becomes overly strong soon declines —
this is not the Way.
Whatever is not the Way comes to an early end.

31

## CEASING WAR

For those who walk the Way, weapons are inauspicious tools,
objects of dread to be avoided.
Those who live by the Way do not rely on them.
The noble honour the left,
but the military honours the right.

Weapons are ill-omened instruments,
unfit for noble use.
They are wielded only out of necessity—
with calm, restraint, and sorrow.
Victory is never a cause for celebration.
To revel in victory is to revel in killing,

and those who delight in killing
will never earn the favour of Heaven.

Good fortune aligns with the left;
misfortune aligns with the right.
The deputy general stands to the left,
the commander to the right,

as in a funeral procession.
Those who bring death and destruction
must be mourned with sorrow and grief.
Even in victory, let it be observed as a funeral.

32

## HOLY VIRTUE

The Way is eternally nameless.

Though humble and small,
nothing in the world can subdue it.
If rulers could hold to it,
all things would align of their own accord.
Nature would unite,
bestowing sweet dew,
and without commands,
all would find harmony.

In the beginning, names arose.
Once names were given,
limits became known.
By knowing when to stop, one avoids peril.

The Way flows through the world,
like rivers and streams merging with the great seas.

33

## DISCERNING VIRTUE

Those who understand others are wise.
Those who understand themselves are enlightened.

Those who overcome others are powerful.
Those who overcome themselves are truly strong.

Those who know contentment are wealthy.
Those who remain steadfast have resolve.

Those who stay rooted endure.
Those who die yet leave a legacy are everlasting.

34

## ACHIEVING GREATNESS

The Great Way is vast and boundless;
it flows to the left and to the right.

All things rely on it for life,
yet it does not seek recognition.
Its work is complete,
yet it claims no credit.
It nourishes and sustains all things,
yet it does not seek to rule them.

Always without desire,
it may be called humble.

All things return to it,
yet it does not act as their master.
It may be called great.

Thus, the sage achieves greatness,
by not striving for greatness.
And because they do not strive for greatness, they can achieve true greatness.

35

## KINDNESS

Hold fast to the Great Image,
and the world will come to you.
It comes without harm,
bringing peace and harmony.

Music and delicacies attract the wayfarer,
but the Way is plain;
it has no flavour.

Look for it, and you will not see it.
Listen for it, and you will not hear it.
Use it, and it will never be exhausted.

36

## THE HIDDEN LIGHT

To draw something in,
one must first let it expand.
To weaken something,
one must first make it strong.
To diminish something,
one must first let it flourish.
To take something away,
one must first give it.

This is called subtle illumination.

The soft and weak overcome the hard and strong.

Fish cannot leave the deep waters,
and the sharp tools of the state
should not be shown to the people.

37

## GOVERNING

The Way is ever without effort,
yet nothing is left undone.

If the rulers could abide by it,
all things would transform naturally.
If desires should arise,
I would quiet them with the nameless simplicity.

The nameless simplicity is plain and unadorned.
When free of desire,
The people find serenity.
In stillness, the world naturally finds its harmony.

# *Part II*

# *Virtue*

38

## ON INNER POWER

Higher virtue does not regard itself as virtuous, and thus it
possesses true virtue.
Lower virtue clings to virtue, and thus it lacks true virtue.

Higher virtue acts effortlessly, without conscious intent.
Lower virtue acts with effort, driven by ulterior motives.
Higher benevolence acts without self-interest.
Higher righteousness acts with clear intent.
Higher propriety acts, but when no one responds,
it rolls up its sleeves and enforces compliance.

Thus, when the Way is lost, virtue appears.
When virtue is lost, benevolence arises.
When benevolence is lost, righteousness emerges.
When righteousness is lost, propriety takes hold.
Propriety is the thinning of loyalty and sincerity,
and the beginning of chaos.

Those who admire the Way's superficial beauty
fail to grasp its depth, and this marks the start of folly.

Therefore, the person of true greatness
dwells in the substantial, not the superficial.
They embrace the fruit and discard the flowers.
Thus, they let go of the superficial and choose the real.

39

## THE FOUNDATION OF THE WAY

In ancient times, those who achieved greatness attained the One.
Heaven attained the One and became clear.
Earth attained the One and became stable.
Spirits attained the One and became powerful.
Valleys attained the One and became full.
All things attained the One and came into being.
Rulers attained the One and governed with integrity.
These are the outcomes of attaining the One.

If Heaven loses its clarity,
it is feared it will split.
If Earth loses its stability,
it is feared it will crack.
If spirits lose their power,
it is feared they will fade.
If valleys lose their fullness,
it is feared they will run dry.
If all things lose their vitality,
it is feared they will perish.
If rulers lose their integrity,
it is feared they will fall.

Thus, what is noble is rooted in humility,
and what is high is founded on the low.
This is why rulers call themselves 'orphaned,' 'widowed,' and
'unworthy.'
Is this not because they take humility as their foundation?
Indeed, it is so.

Therefore, seek not to be highly esteemed.
Do not desire to be polished like jade,
but instead, remain rough like stone.

40

## ABANDONING USE

Reversion is the motion of the Way.
Yielding is the function of the Way.

All things in the world arise from being,
and being arises from non-being.

41

## SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

When those of superior character hear of the Way, they diligently follow it.
When those of average character hear of the Way, they grasp it and lose it by turns.
When those of inferior character hear of the Way, they laugh aloud.
If they did not laugh, it would not be the Way.

Thus, it is said:
The clear Way appears obscure.
Advancing on the Way feels like retreat.
The smooth Way seems uneven.
The highest virtue appears like a valley.
Great purity appears tarnished.
Vast virtue appears deficient.
Established virtue seems fragile.
True sincerity appears changeable.

The great square has no corners.
The greatest vessels are slow to complete.
The greatest sounds are rarely heard.
The greatest forms have no shape.
The Way is hidden and nameless.

Only the Way excels in both beginning and completing.

42

## THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE WAY

The Way gave birth to One.
One gave birth to Two.
Two gave birth to Three.
Three gave birth to all things.
All things carry yin (negative energy) on their backs and embrace yang (positive energy) in their hearts.
The blending of these two creates harmony.

People detest being called
'orphaned,' 'widowed,' or 'unworthy,'
yet rulers call themselves these names.

Thus, some things
are diminished yet gain,
others are increased but lose.

What others teach, I also teach:
The strong and inflexible do not die a natural death.
This is the core of my teaching.

43

## USING CONTARIETY

The softest thing in the world
overcomes the hardest thing.

That which has no substance penetrates what has no gaps.
Thus, I understand the benefit of non-action:

teaching without words,
acting without effort.
Few in the world can attain this.

44

## UPHOLDING VIGILANCE

Which is more precious, fame or self?
Which has greater worth, self or wealth?
Which brings more harm, gain or loss?

Therefore, deep love incurs great expense.
Amassing much leads to significant loss.

Knowing contentment avoids disgrace.
Knowing when to stop prevents danger.
Thus, one can endure for a long time.

45

## THE GREAT GOOD

The greatest achievement seems incomplete,
yet its usefulness is undiminished.

The greatest fullness appears empty,
but its use is inexhaustible.

What is perfectly straight seems bent.
The greatest skill seems clumsy.
The greatest eloquence appears awkward.

Calmness overcomes agitation.
Serenity conquers heat.

Purity and tranquility are the world's true order.

46

## FRUGAL DESIRE

When the world follows the Way,
horses will return to being used for farming.
When the world strays from the Way,
warhorses will roam the wilderness.

There is no greater sin than to give in to desire.
There is no greater misfortune than not knowing when enough is enough.
There is no greater fault than endless desire.

Therefore, knowing sufficiency is true contentment. This is always enough!

47

## THE PROFOUND MIRROR

Without stepping outside,
one knows the world;
without looking through the window,
one understands the Way of Heaven.

The further one travels,
the less one knows.

Thus, the sage
knows without travelling,
names things without seeing,
and achieves without acting.

48

FORGETFULNESS

The scholar accumulates knowledge each day;
the Wayfarer reduces knowledge each day.
They reduce and reduce,
until they reach effortless action—

acting without striving yet leaving nothing undone.
To take the world, act without interference.
Those who interfere will fail.
The greedy cannot grasp the world.

49

## VIRTUOUS CONDUCT

The sage has no fixed heart,
for they take the hearts of the people as their own.

I act virtuously toward the virtuous,
and toward the unvirtuous—
this is the virtue of virtue.

I trust those who are trustworthy,
and those who are not—
this is the virtue of trust.

Wherever the sage dwells in the world, they are gentle,
embracing the world's muddy heart.

All people listen and watch
the sage, as children would.

50

## VALUING LIFE

Birth leads to death.
Of those who live, three out of ten follow the path of life;
three out of ten follow the path of death.
Among those living active lives,
three out of ten still meet death.

Why is this?
Because they live too intensely.

I have heard those who nurture life
can walk through the land unharmed by tigers.
Even amid battle, they are unscathed by armour or weapons.
There is no place for the horny beast to thrust its horns,
no place for the tiger to use its claws,
no place for soldiers to strike with their blades.

Why is this?
Because they avoid the realm of death.

51

## CULTIVATING THE GOOD

The Way gives birth to all things:
Virtue nurtures them;
matter shapes them;
energy completes them.

Thus, all things
honour the Way and value Virtue.
The honour of the Way,
the value of Virtue—
no one commands this,
yet it arises naturally.

Therefore, the Way gives birth to all things: Virtue nurtures them.
They grow and are cared for,
sheltered and challenged,
nourished and protected.

The Way gives life but does not possess,
acts without dependence,
leads without domination.
This is called profound virtue.

52

## RETURNING TO THE SOURCE

The world has a beginning;
this beginning is called the mother of the world.
By knowing the mother,
we understand her children.
By knowing the children,
we return to and safeguard the mother.

Thus, the body remains safe until the end of life.

Close the mouth, shut the gates,
and you will endure without toil.
Open the mouth, meddle in affairs,
and you will struggle without relief.

Perceiving the subtle is called clarity.
Holding to softness is called strength.
By using the light to return to clarity,
one avoids misfortune in life.
This is called practising constancy.

53

## EVIDENCE OF EXCESS

If I were to possess true understanding,
I would walk the great Way.
I would only fear
straying from this great Way.
Yet the people prefer side paths.

The court is deeply divided,
the fields are overgrown with weeds,
and granaries are alarmingly empty.
Meanwhile, the elite wear embroidered silks,
belted with sharp swords,
indulge in excessive food and drink,
and hoard wealth and goods in surplus.

Truly, such behaviour is the boast of robbers.
This is not the Way!

54

## CULTIVATING VISION

The virtuous person does not withdraw;
the one who embraces virtue does not let go.
Thus, the descendants of those who offer sacrifices
will not cease their worship.

Cultivating oneself brings forth virtue.
Cultivating the household amplifies virtue.
Cultivating the village ensures virtue lasts.
Cultivating the state enriches virtue.
Cultivating the world makes virtue universal.

Therefore, observe the self to comprehend the self,
observe the household to understand the household,
observe the village to grasp the village,
observe the state to learn about the state,
observe the world to know the world.

How can I ascertain this about the world?
Through this.

55

## THE PROFOUND TOKEN

Those who embrace profound virtue
are like a newborn babe.
Poisonous insects do not sting them,
fierce beasts do not seize them,
and predatory birds do not attack them.
Their bones are weak, their muscles soft, yet their grip is strong.
They do not yet know the union of the female and the male,
yet their essence is whole and abundant.
They cry all day without becoming hoarse—
this is the pinnacle of harmony.

To know harmony is to know constancy.
To know constancy is to attain clarity.
Abundant vitality brings good fortune.
The mind directing vital energy is called strength.

Yet all things, when fully vigorous, grow old—
this is called going against the Way.
Whatever goes against the Way will soon perish.

56

## THE PROFOUND GOOD

Those who truly know do not speak.
Those who speak do not truly know.

Block the openings; shut the doors.
Blunt the sharp edges;
loosen the tangled knots;
soften the brightness;
be in harmony with the dust.
This is called profound unity.

Those who achieve this unity cannot be approached,
nor can they be distanced;
they cannot be benefitted,
nor can they be harmed;
they cannot be exalted,
nor can they be debased.

Therefore, the world honours them.

57

## CLEARING THE AIR

Govern the country with justice.
Wage war with cunning.
Attain the world through effortless action.
How do I know this to be true?
By observing the following:

The more prohibitions and taboos there are,
the poorer the people become.
The more advanced tools a country possesses,
the more chaotic its affairs become.
The more people pursue cleverness and skill,
the more strange and harmful things arise.
The more laws and decrees are enacted,
the more thieves and robbers multiply.

Therefore, the sage says:
"I act without interference, and the people transform themselves.
I value stillness, and the people become upright on their own.
I take no action, and the people prosper on their own.
I have no desires, and the people return to simplicity and
natural lives."

58

## HARMONY WITH CHANGE

Where the government is obscure and non-intrusive,
the people are sincere and honest.
Where the government is scrutinizing and rigid,
the people are in want and distress.

Misfortune leans upon good fortune;
good fortune conceals misfortune within.
Who knows where these turn?
What is righteous may become deviant;
what is good may become a source of harm.

The people's confusion
has endured for a long time.

Thus, the sagacious person is
firm but not divisive,
upright but not injurious,
direct yet not unrestrained,
radiant yet not ostentatious.

59

## GUARDING THE PATH

In managing people's affairs and serving the heavens,
nothing compares to practising thrift.

True thrift, I say,
means beginning with early devotion.
To begin with early devotion is to accumulate virtue profoundly.
Through this profound accumulation of virtue,
one becomes unconquerable.
Being unconquerable,
one's limits are unknown.
With no limits,
one can govern the nation.
By governing with the nurturing spirit of the mother,
the nation will endure for a long time.

This is called having deep roots and a strong foundation:
the way to longevity and clear vision.

60

## ABIDING

Managing a great country is like cooking a small delicacy.

When the world is governed in accordance with the Way,
the spirits lose their power to disturb.

It is not that the spirits lack power,
but their power does not harm people.

And it is not that the spirits avoid harming people,
but the sage does not harm people either.

Since neither harms the other,
virtue naturally returns to all.

61

## THE VIRTUE OF HUMILITY

Great nations are like lower streams,
the meeting places of the world,
the receptive female of the world.

The female, through stillness, overcomes the male;
by remaining low, she prevails.

Therefore, when great nations humble themselves before small nations,
they win over the small nations.
And when small nations humble themselves before great nations,
they gain favour with the great nations.

Thus, whether one lowers itself to conquer,
or lowers itself and gains,

a great nation seeks to shelter and nourish others,
while a small country seeks to serve and support others.
Both achieve what they desire,
and the great should remain humble.

62

## PRACTISING THE WAY

The Way is the hidden foundation of all things:
a treasure of the virtuous,
and a refuge of the unvirtuous.

Kind words may be sold in the marketplace;
noble actions can enhance one's reputation.
Why, then, should those who lack virtue
be cast aside?

Thus, when a ruler is established
and the three ministers appointed,
though they offer gifts of jade and splendid horses,
it is better to sit and embrace the Way.

Why did the ancients so revere this Way?
Is it not said:
"Through seeking, one finds,
and through forgiveness, one is freed from blame"?

Therefore, the world holds it in high esteem.

63

## THE ORIGIN OF KINDNESS

Act without attachment;
work without strain;
savour without craving.

Make large what is small; make many from few;
repay hostility with virtue.

Prepare for the difficult by beginning with the easy;
realize greatness through focus on the minute.
In the world, challenging endeavours begin with simplicity;
in the world, significant tasks start with small steps.

Thus, the wise avoid seeking grandiosity;
in doing so, they can achieve greatness.

One who easily makes promises gains little trust.
Much ease often results in many hardships.

Thus, the wise person remains cautious,
and, ultimately, encounters no real difficulties.

64

## GUARDING THE SUBTLE

Stillness is easy to maintain.
What is not yet revealed is easy to plan for.
The fragile is easily broken.
The small is easily scattered.
Act before the need arises;
regulate before disorder occurs.

The greatest tree grows from the tiniest seed.
A nine-story tower begins with a mound of earth.
A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step.

The one who acts faces defeat;
the one who grasps loses their hold.

Thus, the wise person
does not act, and so is not defeated;
they do not cling, and thus do not lose their grasp.

People often become complacent just as their work approaches completion, leading to loss.
Be cautious at the end as at the beginning;
then there will be no defeat.

Therefore, the wise person
desires no desire;
they do not value what is hard to attain.
They learn without learning

and return to the path overlooked by the multitude.
By allowing all things to follow their nature,
they do not dare to act.

65

## THE VIRTUE OF SINCERITY

Ancient people excelled at following the Way,
not to enlighten people,
but to keep them uninformed.
People are difficult to govern
because they possess too much knowledge.

Thus, when cunning governs the state,
the state becomes a victim.
When cunning does not govern the state,
the state enjoys blessings.
The one who understands both is also able to assess the situation.

Always knowing how to assess the situation—
this is called profound virtue.
Profound virtue is deep and far-reaching,
and it often runs counter to conventional norms.
In truth, they attain great harmony.

66

## PUTTING ONESELF AFTER

The great rivers and seas can rule over the hundreds of valleys
because they excel at remaining low.
By staying low, they are able to lead the valleys.

Therefore, the sage,
who desires to rise above the people,
must speak humbly.
And one who wishes to lead them
must place themselves behind them.

Thus, the sage
stands above, yet the people do not feel burdened;
leads from the front, yet the people are not harmed.
As a result, all under heaven gladly push them forward without weariness,

because they do not strive.
Therefore, no one in the world can compete with them.

67

## THREE JEWELS

The whole world says my path is great,
but it seems unlike anything else.
Precisely because it is different, it can be great.
If it were like anything else,
it would have long been small.

I have three treasures,
which I hold and protect:
The first is compassion;
the second is frugality;
the third is not daring to be first in the world.

With compassion, one can be courageous.
With frugality, one can be generous.
With not daring to be first,
one can lead and endure.

But now, people abandon compassion and still seek courage,
abandon frugality and seek greatness,
abandon humility and rush to be first—
this will lead to death.

For compassion, when used in battle, leads to victory.
In defence, it ensures strength.
Heaven will save
and protect the compassionate.

68

## HARMONY WITH HEAVEN

The virtuous person does not resort to violence.
The skilled warrior does not act out of anger.
The true victor does not engage in conflict.
The wise leader serves those they guide.

This is called the virtue of non-contention.
This is called the strength of utilizing others.
This is called aligning with the ancient principles of the cosmos.

69

## THE PROFOUND APPLICATION

Those who employ soldiers have a saying:
"I do not dare act as the master; I will act as the guest.
I do not dare advance an inch; I will retreat a foot."

Truly, I say: "Act without acting;
seize without taking;
throw without striking;
capture without weapons."

There is no greater misfortune than underestimating the enemy.
Belittling the enemy nearly cost me my treasure.

Therefore, to resist conflict is mutually beneficial;
how pitiful is the victor!

70

## UNDERSTANDING DIFFICULTY

My words are very easy to understand,
and very easy to follow.
Yet no one in the world can comprehend them;
no one can follow them.

My words have a lineage;
my actions have a principle.

Truly, it is because people lack understanding
that I am not known.
The one who understands me is rare,
and thus, I become valuable to them.

Therefore, the wise person, clad in coarse clothing, is cherished like jade.

71

## AWARENESS OF DEFECTS

To know that you do not know is true wisdom.
To think you know when you do not is a sickness.

Only those who recognize this sickness as sickness
are free from sickness.

The sage is free from sickness
because they recognize sickness as sickness.
Thus, by acknowledging it, they remain free from it.

72

SELF-LOVE

If people do not fear authority,
then a greater authority will arise.

Let them not disdain their dwellings
or despise their homeland,

for the one who does not despise
will not be despised in return.

Truly, the wise person
knows themselves but does not display themselves;
loves themselves but does not exalt themselves.

Thus, they let go of the superficial and embrace the profound.

73

## EMBRACING ACTION

Courage in daring
leads to death.
Courage in restraint
leads to life.

Both bring benefit or harm—
who can know why Heaven detests one or the other?

Thus, the sage finds the Way of Heaven difficult to grasp:
Without striving, they achieve victory.
Without speaking, they respond effectively.
Without summoning, others come naturally.
In calmness, they devise excellent plans.

Heaven's net is vast and wide.
Its mesh may seem loose, yet nothing slips through it.

74

## CUTTING THROUGH CONFUSION

When people do not fear death,
what good is there in threatening them with it?
If the people were always made to fear death
and I seized those who acted strangely and executed them—
who would dare to defy?

There is always an official executioner in place.
To take the executioner's role and kill on their behalf
is like taking the place of a master carpenter in cutting wood.
Those who try to take the master carpenter's place in cutting
rarely avoid injuring their own hands.

75

## GREED AND LOSS

People are hungry
because their rulers take too much in taxes;
thus, they go hungry.

People are difficult to govern
because their rulers interfere excessively;
thus, they are hard to govern.

People take death lightly
because they strive too eagerly to live lavishly;
thus, they make light of death.

Therefore, only one who does not strive to preserve life at all costs
is truly wiser than one who values life too highly.

76

## WARNING AGAINST STRENGTH

The living are soft and yielding;
in death, they are stiff and unyielding.
All things, grasses and trees alike,
are born tender and fragile;
in death, they become brittle and dry.

Thus, what is firm and rigid follows the way of death,
while what is soft and pliant follows the way of life.

Therefore, strong soldiers do not win,
and strong trees are cut down.

The hard and mighty are brought low,
while the soft and gentle rise up.

77

## THE WAY OF HEAVEN

The Way of Heaven is like bending a bow:
The high is brought low;
the low is lifted up.
Those with surplus are reduced;
those who lack are replenished.

The Way of Heaven
takes from those with excess and gives to those in need.
The way of man is not like this:
It takes from those in need to serve those with surplus.

Who can have excess and still serve the world?
Only those who follow the Way.

Thus, the sage
acts without claiming credit,
accomplishes without dwelling on it,
and does not wish to appear superior.

78

## TRUST AND RESPONSIBILITY

In the world, nothing is softer or weaker than water,
yet when it attacks the hard and strong,
no one can conquer it,
because it cannot be easily changed.

Weakness overcomes strength;
softness overcomes hardness.
In the world, no one is unaware of this,
yet no one can act upon it.

Thus, the sage says:
"Whoever accepts the dirt of the state
is truly the master of the land;
whoever bears the misfortune of the country
is truly the ruler of the world."

Right words often seem wrong.

79

## ENTRUSTMENT

The resolution of great resentment
will inevitably leave some grievance behind.
How can this be considered virtuous?

Thus, the sage holds the left-hand contract
and does not hold others accountable.

Therefore, those with virtue manage agreements,
while those without virtue focus on enforcement.

The Way of Heaven is impartial;
it always sides with the virtuous.

80

SELF-RELIANCE

In a small country with few people,
even if they possess many tools, they would not use them.
The people would value life and avoid migration.
Though they have boats and carts, there would be no need to ride them.
Though they have armour and weapons, there would be no occasion to display them.

I would have the people return to the use of knotted cords,
to savour their food,
take pleasure in their clothing,
find peace in their homes,
and delight in their traditions.

Neighbouring countries would be within sight of one another,
and the sounds of chickens and dogs would carry between them.
Yet the people would grow old and die,
without ever travelling back and forth.

81

## REVEALING THE TRUE NATURE

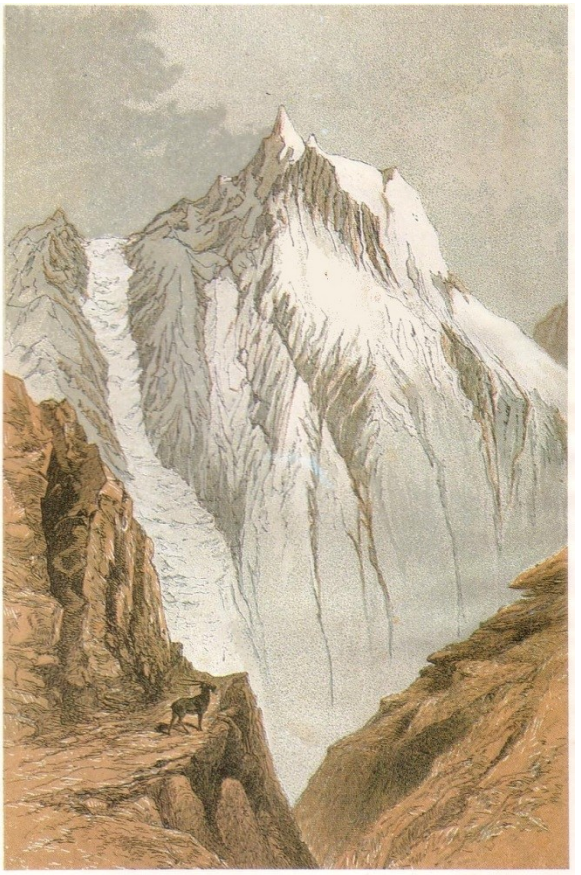
Truthful words are not beautiful;
beautiful words are not truthful.

The good do not argue;
those who argue are not good.

The wise are not learned;
the learned are not necessarily wise.

The sage does not hoard;
the more he does for others, the more he possesses.
The more he gives to others, the more he gains.

The Way of Heaven benefits without harming,
and the Way of the sage is to act without contention.



PEAK IN THE KUEN LUN RANGE.

DRAWN BY MAJOR STRUTT FROM A SKETCH BY H. B. SHAW.

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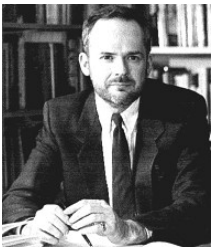
# ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR



Seten Tomh (b. 1954) is the author of *Fundamental View: Ten Talks on the Pali Canon, Conversations with the Buddha, Dharma Talks,* and *The Treasure House of Secrets: Talks on the Lotus Sutra.* His work bridges traditional Buddhist texts and modern spiritual inquiry, grounded in decades of disciplined study and lived practice. Since 2002, he has pursued a sustained, comparative analysis of the Tao Te Ching, refining a translation that honours Laozi's distinctive voice while speaking clearly to the needs of the present. The translation reflects a universalist path — one rooted in the ancient, responsive to the now, and committed to what endures.